

US destroyer downs Houthi missile

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — An anti-ship missile launched Tuesday from Houthi-controlled territory in Yemen was targeting the Navy destroyer that shot it down, making it the second militant attack on a U.S. warship patrolling in the Red Sea in recent days.

At about 11:30 p.m. Tuesday, USS Gravelly shot down one missile over the Red Sea, U.S. Central Command said in a statement Wednesday. The ship wasn't damaged and no one was hurt, officials said.

A Houthi military spokesman said the group took responsibility for Tuesday's attack, adding that they had fired several missiles and would continue attack-

ing U.S. and U.K. forces, The Associated Press reported Wednesday.

The attack followed a missile launch Friday by the Iranian-backed Houthi militants at the destroyer USS Carney in the Gulf of Aden. The ship destroyed the Houthi missile.

In other cases, defense officials say the Houthis have exaggerated their claims. The group said Monday they targeted the expeditionary mobile base USS Louis B. Puller, also in the Gulf of Aden. The attack didn't happen, according to the Pentagon.

The strike at USS Gravelly comes as tensions in the Middle East continue and the U.S. prepares a response to a Sunday drone attack on a base in Jordan that killed three soldiers and in-

jured dozens more.

Concerns also remain about the impact of Houthi attacks on international shipping in the heavily trafficked Red Sea.

Last week, New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon announced the country would deploy six people as part of the U.S.-led Operation Prosperity Guardian to protect ships in the Red Sea. Most of the support for the mission thus far has come from NATO alliance members.

A European Union mission to protect Red Sea shipping is expected to begin in mid-February. The commission will decide Wednesday which country will lead the effort, Politico.eu reported. Italy and France, which already have military ships in

the area, along with Greece are among front-runners to lead the mission, according to the report.

The Houthis had launched 36 attacks on ships since Nov. 19 as of Monday, the Pentagon said. The attacks include an anti-ship missile that struck a Marshall Islands-flagged ship carrying a highly flammable liquid mixture in the Gulf of Aden on Friday. The strike caused a fire in one of the ship's cargo holds.

USS Carney, along with French and Indian military ships, helped put out the fire.

The Houthis have said their attacks will continue in support of Palestinians and until there is a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas. U.S. officials say the group is targeting vessels that have no connection to Israel.

Iran vows to respond to any US retaliatory attacks

Associated Press

JERUSALEM — Iran threatened Wednesday to “decisively respond” to any U.S. attack on the Islamic Republic following President Joe Biden's linking of Tehran to the killing of three U.S. soldiers at a military base in Jordan.

The U.S. has signaled it is preparing for retaliatory strikes in the Mideast in the wake of the Sunday drone attack that also wounded at least 40 troops at Tower 22, a secretive base in northeastern Jordan that's been crucial to the American presence in neighboring Syria.

National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said Wednesday the U.S. believes the attack was planned, resourced and facilitated by the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, an

umbrella group of Iran-backed militias that includes the militant group Kataib Hezbollah.

Any additional American strikes could further inflame a region already roiled by Israel's ongoing war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The war began with Hamas attacking Israel on Oct. 7, killing some 1,200 people and taking about 250 hostage. Since then, Israel has killed more than 26,000 Palestinians and displaced nearly 2 million others, arousing anger throughout the Muslim world.

Violence has erupted across the Mideast, with Iran striking targets in Iraq, Pakistan and Syria, and the U.S. carrying out airstrikes targeting Yemen's Houthi rebels over their attacks on shipping in the Red Sea.

Some observers fear a new round of strikes targeting Iran could tip the region into a wider war.

The Iranian warnings first came from Amir Saeid Iravani, Iran's ambassador to the United Nations in New York. He gave a briefing to Iranian journalists late Tuesday, according to the state-run IRNA news agency.

“The Islamic Republic would decisively respond to any attack on the country, its interests and nationals under any pretexts,” IRNA quoted Iravani as saying. He described any possible Iranian retaliation as a “strong response,” without elaborating.

The Iranian mission to the U.N. did not respond to requests for comment or elaboration on Iravani's remarks.

Qatar often serves as an inter-

mediary between Washington and Tehran.

“Such messages have not been exchanged,” Iravani said.

But Iran's government has taken note of the U.S. threats of retaliation for the attack on the base in Jordan.

“Sometime, our enemies raise the threat, and nowadays we hear some threats in between words by American officials,” Revolutionary Guard commander Gen. Hossein Salami, who answers only to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, said at an event Wednesday. “We tell them that you have experienced us, and we know each other. We do not leave any threat without an answer.”

“We are not after war, but we have no fear of war,” he added.

Hawaii officials tell Navy to test well shaft

By **WYATT OLSON**
Stars and Stripes

FORT SHAFTER, Hawaii — The Hawaii Department of Health has directed the Navy to test one of its wells near Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam after learning of another spate of complaints about tap water quality.

A member of the Red Hill Community Representative Initiative informed Health Department officials on Thursday that about 50 users of the Navy's water distribution system had complained about the water, the department said in a news release Monday.

A handful of residents complained of similar problems in October.

"DOH is taking these reports seriously and as the state regulator for Hawaii's water purveyors, the department contin-

ues to conduct oversight of the Navy's water distribution system," the release said.

The Navy's water distribution system for the joint base and surrounding military communities was contaminated in late 2021 by a jet fuel spill from the Red Hill Bulk Fuel Storage Facility on the outskirts of Honolulu a few miles from the base.

The leak contaminated one of three wells used by the Navy for its water distribution system, one of which remains contaminated but isolated from the system.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin in March 2022 ordered the facility permanently closed, and the Defense Department is in the process of emptying the roughly 40,000 gallons of fuel left in the tanks.

The 10-member Community Representative Initiative was established in September to liaison

directly with the Navy, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Defense Logistics Agency in regard to water safety issues arising from the Red Hill facility.

Lacey Quintero, a member of the initiative, said by phone Tuesday that the new complaints are both about how the water looks and smells, as well as health issues stemming from the water.

Some samples have a sheen, while others exude a visible vapor, she said.

Complaints are widespread and not confined to a single neighborhood, she said.

The Health Department on Monday directed the Navy to test its Waiawa well shaft.

Petroleum was not detected in samples taken from that well in October, the Health Department said in the release.

In addition, Health Department officials have requested

contact information for each of the complainants so that on-site inspections and sampling can be conducted, the news release states.

Navy Region Hawaii instructed residents how to report problems with tap water in a Monday news release.

"Water concerns can be reported, and in-home testing can be requested, without fear of reprisal," the release states. "The Navy will provide bottled water to residents until validated test results from the [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency]-certified laboratory confirm that the water meets Federal and State safe drinking water standards."

The Waiawa shaft, more than six miles from the Red Hill fuel facility, has been the Navy's sole source for its system since December 2021, the Navy news release states.

Ukraine to be pushed back, Putin tells campaign staff

Associated Press

MOSCOW — President Vladimir Putin vowed Wednesday to push back Ukrainian forces to reduce the threat of attacks on Russian territory as he met with activists running his campaign ahead of the March presidential election that he's all but certain to win.

Asked about plans for the military campaign in Ukraine, Putin said the line of contact needs to be pushed back to "such a distance from our territory that will make it safe from Western-supplied long-range artillery that Ukrainian authorities use for shelling peaceful cities."

He added the Russian military has been doing just that, "pushing the enemy back from vital populated centers."

"This is the main motive for

our guys who are fighting and risking their lives there — to protect the Motherland, to protect our people," he added.

Ukraine has struck inside Russia recently, including a Dec. 30 attack on the border city of Belgorod that killed 25 people, injured over 100.

Putin, 71, who is running as an independent candidate, relies on a tight control over Russia's political system that he has established during 24 years in power. With prominent critics who could challenge him either jailed or living abroad and most independent media banned, his reelection in the March 15-17 presidential vote is all but assured.

"Russia has been forced to defend its interests, including by military means," Putin told the meeting with his campaign staff.

150 killed, 313 hurt in day, Gaza Health Ministry says

Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — Gaza's Health Ministry says 150 people were killed in a 24-hour period and an additional 313 were wounded.

The deaths bring the Palestinian death toll from Israel's offensive to 26,900, according to the Hamas-controlled ministry. It does not distinguish between civilian and combatant deaths but says most of those killed were women and children.

The nearly four-month war began with Hamas' Oct. 7 attack in Israel, in which Palestinian militants killed about 1,200 people and abducted another 250.

Israeli forces are still battling militants across Gaza, even in the northern part of the territory, which was the initial target of the ground offensive in late October.

The military said Wednesday that its forces killed more than 15 Hamas militants in northern Gaza over the past day and targeted militant infrastructure in a school.

Meanwhile, an array of U.N. organizations that focus on refugees, humanitarian aid, migration, health, children, food, women, human rights and other issues have united in an appeal to some key donor countries to reconsider their plans to halt funding for UNRWA, the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees. The U.S. and more than a dozen other countries have announced plans to suspend contributions to UNRWA after Israel alleged that 12 of its workers participated in the Oct. 7 attack. U.N. officials fired most of the workers and vowed an investigation.

House Republicans conduct party-line vote on Mayorkas

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — House Republicans voted along party lines early Wednesday to move toward impeaching Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas for a “willful and systematic” refusal to enforce immigration laws as border security becomes a top 2024 election issue.

The Homeland Security Committee debated all day Tuesday and well into the night before recommending two articles of impeachment against Mayorkas to the full House, a rare charge against a Cabinet official unseen in nearly 150 years, as Republicans make GOP presidential front-runner Donald Trump’s hard-line deportation approach to immigration their own.

The committee Republicans voted in favor, while the Democrats unified against, 18-15.

“We cannot allow this man to remain in office any longer,” said Chairman Mark Green, R-Tenn.

The impeachment articles charge that Mayorkas “refused to comply with Federal immigration laws” amid a record surge of migrants and that he has “breached the public trust” in his claims to Congress that the U.S.-Mexico border is secure.

The full House could vote on Mayorkas’ impeachment as soon as next week. If approved, the charges would go to the Senate for a trial, though senators may first convene a special committee for consideration.

With an unusual personal appeal, Mayorkas — who is deep in Senate talks on a border security package — wrote in a letter to the committee that it

should be working with the Biden administration to update the nation’s “broken and outdated” immigration laws for the 21st century, an era of record global migration.

“We need a legislative solution and only Congress can provide it,” Mayorkas wrote in the pointed letter to the panel’s chairman.

Rarely has a Cabinet member faced impeachment’s bar of “high crimes and misdemeanors,” and Democrats on the panel dismissed the proceedings as a stunt and a sham that could set a chilling precedent for other civil servants snared in policy disputes by lawmakers who disagree with the president’s approach.

The Republicans are focused on the secretary’s handling of the southern border, which has experienced an increasing number of migrants over the past year, many seeking asylum in the U.S., at a time when drug cartels are using the border with Mexico to traffic people and ship deadly fentanyl into the states.

Rep, Elise Stefanik, R-N.Y., a Trump ally often mentioned as a possible vice presidential pick, called it an “invasion.”

Republicans contend that the Biden administration and Mayorkas either got rid of policies in place under Trump that had controlled migration or enacted policies of their own that encouraged migrants from around the world to come to the U.S. illegally via the southern border.

House Speaker Mike Johnson said Biden and Mayorkas have “created a catastrophe” on the border, and he criticized the emerging Senate package.

Man accused of beheading father in Pa., posting video

Associated Press

LEVITTOWN, Pa. — A man accused of beheading his father in suburban Philadelphia and posting a gruesome video on social media that shows him holding up the severed head has been charged with first-degree murder and abusing a corpse, authorities said Wednesday.

Justin Mohn, 32, was armed and had jumped a fence at a National Guard facility about 100 miles away when he was arrested late Tuesday, hours after the killing, a Guard spokeswoman said. The father, identified as Michael Mohn, was found beheaded in the bathroom of his home in Levittown, where court records said his son also lived.

Police said Michael Mohn’s wife, Denise Mohn, arrived home and found the body at about 7 p.m. Tuesday. Officers found Mohn’s body in the first floor bathroom and his head inside a plastic bag in a kitchen pot placed in a first-floor bedroom, according to a police affidavit. Officers said they found bloody rubber gloves in a bedroom on the second floor. Denise Mohn said her husband’s white Toyota Corolla and her

son were missing.

Police said the YouTube video, which was more than 14 minutes long, showed Justin Mohn picking up his father’s decapitated head and identifying him by name. Police said it appeared Mohn was reading from a script as he railed about the government.

In the video, he described his father as a 20-year federal employee and called him a traitor to his country.

He also espoused a variety of conspiracy theories and rants about the Biden administration, immigration and the border, fiscal policy, urban crime and the war in Ukraine.

Neighbors out walking dogs Wednesday morning described Justin Mohn as weird.

Carrie McCarthy said she saw him walking frequently and sitting in the wooded area in the neighborhood. She said someone sent her the YouTube video, which left her stunned.

“I screamed. I totally screamed,” she said. “I opened the video and I was like, ‘Oh my God, that’s they guy I see every day, and I knew something was unhinged.’”

Guardman kills self after comrade dies in truck crash

BY ROSE L. THAYER

Stars and Stripes

AUSTIN, Texas — Two National Guard soldiers were involved in a truck crash early Monday morning in south Texas that killed the passenger. When the driver could not save his fellow soldier, he shot himself dead at the scene, local police said.

Dawit Befakadu Girma, 21, was driving the white Ford F150 and Daniel Luis Molina, 27, was in the passenger seat when the truck rolled over near Laredo at about 1:30 a.m. near Texas State

Highway Loop 20, said Officer J. Espinoza, spokesman for the Laredo Police Department. Molina was thrown from the vehicle during the crash.

An investigation into what caused the truck to rollover continues, he said.

Other people on the road stopped to help and told police that Girma attempted to save Molina’s life with CPR. When he couldn’t, he took a handgun and shot himself dead. Both men were taken to a hospital where they were pronounced dead, Espinoza said.

US sees most cases of syphilis since 1950; gonorrhea declines

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The U.S. syphilis epidemic isn't abating, with the rate of infectious cases rising 9% in 2022, according to a new federal government report on sexually transmitted diseases in adults.

But there's some unexpected good news: The rate of new gonorrhea cases fell for the first time in a decade.

It's not clear why infectious cases of syphilis rose 9% while gonorrhea dropped 9%, officials at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said, adding that it's too soon to know whether a new downward trend is emerging for the latter.

They are most focused on syphilis, which is less common than gonorrhea or chlamydia but considered more dangerous. And while it continues to have a disproportionate impact on gay and bisexual men, it is expanding in heterosexual men and women, and increasingly affecting newborns, too, CDC officials said.

Total cases surpassed 207,000 in 2022, a 17% increase

and the highest count in the United States since 1950, according to data released Tuesday. The count includes not only the most infectious stages of the disease, but also latent cases and cases in which pregnant women passed syphilis on to their babies.

Syphilis is a bacterial disease that can surface as painless genital sores but can ultimately lead to paralysis, hearing loss, dementia and even death if left untreated.

New syphilis infections plummeted in the U.S. starting in the 1940s when antibiotics became widely available and fell to their lowest by 1998.

About 59,000 of the 2022 cases involved the most infectious forms of syphilis. Of those, about a quarter were women and nearly a quarter were heterosexual men.

"I think it's unknowingly being spread in the cisgender heterosexual population because we really aren't testing for it. We really aren't looking for it" in that population, said Dr. Philip Chan, who teaches at Brown

University and is chief medical officer of Open Door Health, a health center for gay, lesbian and transgender patients in Providence, Rhode Island.

The report also shows rates of the most infectious types of syphilis rose not just across the country but also across different racial and ethnic groups, with American Indian and Alaska Native people having the highest rate. South Dakota outpaced any other state for the highest rate of infectious syphilis at 84 cases per 100,000 people — more than twice as high as the state with the second-highest rate, New Mexico.

South Dakota's increase was driven by an outbreak in the Native American community, said Dr. Meghan O'Connell, chief public health officer at the Great Plains Tribal Leaders' Health Board based in Rapid City, S.D. Nearly all of the cases were in heterosexual people, and O'Connell said that STD testing and treatment was already limited in isolated tribal communities and only got worse during the pandemic.

Judge: No \$55B pay package for Musk

Associated Press

DOVER, Del. — Elon Musk is not entitled to a landmark compensation package awarded by Tesla's board of directors that is potentially worth more than \$55 billion, a Delaware judge ruled Tuesday.

The ruling by Chancellor Kathaleen St. Jude McCormick comes more than five years after a shareholder lawsuit targeted Tesla CEO Musk and directors of the company. They were accused of breaching their duties to the maker of electric vehicles and solar panels, resulting in a waste of corporate assets and unjust enrichment for Musk.

The shareholder's lawyers argued that the compensation package should be voided because it was dictated by Musk and was the product of sham negotiations with directors who were not independent of him. They also said it was approved by shareholders who were given misleading and incomplete disclosures in a proxy statement.

Defense attorneys countered that the pay plan was fairly negotiated by a compensation committee whose members were independent, contained performance milestones so lofty that they were ridiculed by some Wall Street investors and blessed by a shareholder vote that was not even required under Delaware law.

They also argued that Musk was not a controlling shareholder because he owned less than one-third of the company at the time.

Musk reacted to the ruling on X, the social media platform formerly known as Twitter that he owns, by offering business advice. "Never incorporate your company in the state of Delaware," he said.

Musk says first human has received brain chip implant from Neuralink

Associated Press

NEW YORK — According to Elon Musk, the first human received an implant from his computer-brain interface company Neuralink over the weekend.

In a Monday post on X, the platform formerly known as Twitter, Musk said the patient received the implant the day prior and was "recovering well." He added that "initial results show promising neuron spike detection."

The billionaire, who co-founded Neuralink, did not pro-

vide additional details about the patient. When Neuralink announced in September that it would begin recruiting people, the company said it was searching for individuals with quadriplegia due to cervical spinal cord injury or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, commonly known as ALS or Lou Gehrig's Disease.

Neuralink is one of many groups working on linking the nervous system to computers, efforts aimed at helping treat brain disorders, overcoming

brain injuries and other applications.

There are more than 40 brain computer interface trials underway, according to clinicaltrials.gov.

Neuralink reposted Musk's Monday post on X, but did not publish any additional statements acknowledging the human implant.

Neuralink's device is about the size of a large coin and is designed to be implanted in the skull, with ultra-thin wires going directly into the brain.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Iraqi DEI coordinator flees state after threats

ME SOUTH PORTLAND—The diversity, equity and inclusion coordinator of public schools in South Portland, Maine, has resigned and left the state, saying he fears for his family’s safety after receiving a threatening letter from a white supremacist.

The attack on Mohammed Albehadli, who came to the U.S. a decade ago from Iraq after it became too dangerous, comes at a time when many Republicans are opposed to DEI initiatives that include recruiting and retaining faculty and students of color.

The Dec. 29 letter, released to The Associated Press under a freedom of information request, contains racist epithets and indicates the New England White Network told Albehadli that he should “go back to the Middle East where you belong.”

Superintendent Timothy Matheney described the letter as the “most vile email message I have seen in my 35 years in education.”

Albehadli, who announced his resignation a week ago, was “an exemplary staff member” who was making a “positive impact” on city schools, Matheney said.

State looks to improve outcomes for prisoners

NC RALEIGH — North Carolina has joined a nascent nationwide effort to improve outcomes for more prisoners who return to society through an approach focused on education, health care and housing.

Gov. Roy Cooper, a Democrat, signed an executive order Monday that seeks to reduce recidivism through formal training and workforce tools for incarcerated people so more can succeed once they are freed.

The order aligns with the goals of Reentry 2030, which is being developed by the Council of State Governments and other groups to promote successful offender integration. The council said that North Carolina is the third state to officially join Reentry 2030, after Missouri and Alabama.

North Carolina has set challenging numerical goals while joining Reentry 2030, such as increasing the number of high school and post-secondary degrees or skills credentials earned by incarcerated people by 75% by 2030. And the number of employers formally willing to employ ex-offenders would increase by 30%.

Babysitter charged with killing dog faces prison

WI WAUKESHA — Prosecutors charged an 18-year-old woman Monday with killing a Wisconsin family’s chihuahua while she was babysitting.

The Washington County woman faces one felony count of animal mistreatment using a dangerous weapon in Waukesha County Circuit Court, WTMJ-TV reported. She would face up to 4 years in prison if convicted.

The Waukesha County Sheriff’s Department said that they received a call to the family’s home in Sussex on Friday evening. The family said they had found their dog, a chihuahua named Batman, dead. He had

suffered a possible stab wound and had a plastic bag on his head, department officials said.

The woman was babysitting the family’s 4-year-old daughter at the time.

Temple tanks explode after fire breaks out

CA SACRAMENTO — Multiple propane tanks exploded Monday after fire broke out at the site of the largest Sikh temple in California’s capital city and flames damaged an outlying building that holds religious classes, authorities said.

Emergency crews were called to Gurdwara Sacramento Sikh Society, a temple southeast of downtown Sacramento, said Metro Fire Battalion Chief Parker Wilbourn. Worshippers were evacuated from the property by sheriff’s deputies, and no injuries were reported, he said.

The fire ignited at least six large propane tanks, causing explosions that sent metal flying at least 50 feet and sending up a huge plume of smoke that could be seen for miles, Wilbourn said.

The cause was under investigation.

State regulates trans bathroom access

UT SALT LAKE CITY — Utah became the latest state to regulate bathroom access for transgender people after Republican Gov. Spencer Cox signed a law Tuesday that requires people in public schools and government-owned buildings to use bathrooms and locker rooms that match their sex assigned at birth.

Under the legislation, trans-

gender people can defend themselves against complaints by proving they had gender-affirming surgery and changed the sex on their birth certificate. Opponents noted not all states allow people to change their birth certificates and that many trans people don’t want to have surgery.

The legislation also requires schools to create “privacy plans” for trans students and others who may not be comfortable using group bathrooms.

The Utah bill requires any new government buildings to include single-occupant bathrooms.

Man sentenced for opening fire at wedding

NH NASHUA — A man convicted of opening fire inside a New Hampshire church during a wedding, wounding a bishop and the bride, was sentenced Monday to 40 years to life in prison.

Dale Holloway, 41, “turned a marriage into mayhem,” prosecutor Seth Dobieski said at the sentencing hearing.

Holloway, who did not attend Monday’s hearing, acted as his own attorney at trial, arguing that he was mentally unstable during the October 2019 shooting at the New England Pentecostal Ministries in Pelham. A jury rejected an insanity defense and found him guilty in November. Holloway is already serving 7½ to 15 years in prison for assaulting his lawyer.

The shooting happened nearly two weeks after Holloway’s stepfather, a pastor at the church, was killed by the son of the groom. The son was later sentenced to prison.

— From wire reports



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NFL opportunities shrink talent pool

Associated Press

MOBILE, Ala. — Most of the focus leading up to the NFL Draft will be on the potential franchise quarterbacks and other first-round talent, but some NFL teams may find slimmer pickings when it comes to the later rounds.

Now, players with less lofty draft stock can still return and collect name, image and likeness money for another season — basically a guaranteed paycheck — sometimes using their extra COVID year. And that's a big reason why a modest 58 underclassmen declared for the draft, the fewest since 2011 (56).

It was evident to Jim Nagy when he was building the Senior Bowl roster. There's plenty of talent at the top, especially with three-year juniors eligible for all-star games like Saturday's Senior Bowl for the first

time, but fewer strong options down the line.

"It was really unique. Rounds five through seven on our board got wiped out in the month of December," said Nagy, a former NFL scout and current Senior Bowl executive director. "We'll see what it looks like in April. NIL is a great thing for the players, an awesome thing, but it does have an effect on the draft, whatever that may be."

He expects plenty of movement with NFL teams trading late-round picks to stock up for next year, or trying to move up into the first four rounds.

NFL Network analyst Daniel Jeremiah agrees that NIL will impact the depth of prospects for the April draft. He thinks that's a positive in many ways for players, their college teams and maybe for NFL teams who get more fully developed pro-

spects, just a year later.

"They can go back and help themselves financially, get better, get more development," Jeremiah said. "So it works for them, it works for the colleges. Obviously they keep their better players on campus."

"For the NFL, eventually you get an easier evaluation because there is more tape to go off of, there is a longer career, there is a bigger track record. I think in the long term, everybody wins."

The NIL impact is here to stay. The extra COVID year is phasing out.

Tennessee Titans general manager Ran Carthon thinks the ripple effect of fewer juniors could be a boon for seniors who might otherwise have gone undrafted.

"In the past, we have usually a high number of early entry ju-

niors that get drafted, which kind of pushes the senior talent down," said Carthon, whose team has the No. 7 pick. "I think this now brings senior talent back into the pool because there are some guys that are quote-unquote undrafted free agents that are worthy of these later-round picks."

"But just because of the sheer number of people that are in there, they just get pushed out. So I think no matter what, you're going to always be able to find value in all those rounds."

He also thinks getting those seniors adds both an element of experience, and that the NIL gives incoming prospects more financial literacy.

"We're not getting guys that are coming to our level that are being exposed to money for the first time," Carthon said.

Cooper helps Gamecocks knock off No. 5 Volunteers

Associated Press

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. — Ta'Lon Cooper hit a critical 3-pointer with 40 seconds left and scored 18 points, and B.J. Mack added 16 points to lead South Carolina to a 63-59 victory over No. 5 Tennessee on Tuesday night.

Myles Stute scored 13 points for the Gamecocks (18-3, 6-2 Southeastern Conference), who have beaten the conference's two highest-ranked teams. They knocked off No. 10 Kentucky on Jan. 23.

The victory was South Carolina's first road win over a top-5 team since 1997.

Dalton Knecht scored 12 points in the final three minutes and finished with 31 points, and Santiago Vescovi added 10 points for the Volunteers (15-5, 5-2), who had won four straight games and 11 of their last 12 entering the game.

Tennessee had its lowest point total of the season.

Georgia Tech 74, No. 3 North Carolina 73: Naithan George scored a go-ahead layup with 7.7 seconds remaining and the host Yellow Jackets ended the Tar Heels' 10-game winning streak.

RJ Davis, who scored a game-high 28 points for North Carolina (17-4, 9-1 Atlantic

Coast Conference), won the race to a loose ball following a missed jumper by George and scored on a layup with 34 seconds remaining for a 73-72 lead.

Following a Georgia Tech timeout, George drove for the go-ahead layup.

No. 8 Kansas 83, Oklahoma State 54: Hunter Dickinson and K.J. Adams Jr. each scored 16 points to lead a balanced scoring attack and the host Jayhawks beat the Cowboys.

Oklahoma State (9-12, 1-7) was led by John-Michael Wright with 16 points.

No. 9 Marquette 85, Villanova 80: Tyler Kolek hit five 3-pointers and scored a career-high 32 points to lead the visiting Golden Eagles to their fifth straight win.

TJ Bamba and Eric Dixon led Villanova (11-10, 4-6) with 24 points apiece.

No. 14 Illinois 87, Ohio State 75: Marcus Domask and Terrence Shannon Jr. each had 23 points and Ty Rodgers had 13 as the visiting Illini beat the Buckeyes.

Jamison Battle scored 21 points and Roddy Gayle Jr. had 20 for the Buckeyes.

No. 25 TCU 85, No. 15 Texas Tech 78: Trevian Tennyson scored 23 points, Micah Peavy added 18 against his former team and

the host Horned Frogs beat the Big 12-leading Red Raiders.

Pop Isaacs scored 25 points and had nine assists for Texas Tech (16-4, 5-2), whose only loss in its previous 12 games had been to fourth-ranked Houston.

No. 17 Utah State 82, San Jose State 61: Great Osobor scored 31 points, his third 30-point game of the season, to lead the host Aggies to their third straight win.

MJ Amey led San Jose State with 14 points and Alvaro Cardenas had 11.

No. 21 Dayton 83, George Washington 61: DaRon Holmes II had 25 points and 12 rebounds as the host Flyers bounced back from their first loss in more than two months to rout the Colonials.

Darren Buchanan Jr. paced GW with 13 points and eight rebounds, and James Bishop IV had 10 for GW (14-7, 3-5), which lost its fourth straight game.

No. 23 Oklahoma 73, Kansas State 53: Jalon Moore scored 23 points, Javian McCollum added 21, and the visiting Sooners pulled away down the stretch for a victory that ended their two-game slide.

Taylor Perry led Kansas State (14-7, 4-4) with 23 points.

Tatum, Celtics turn back Pacers' rally

Associated Press

BOSTON — Jayson Tatum scored 30 points and had two blocks in the final 30 seconds to help the Boston Celtics hold off the Indiana Pacers 129-124 on Tuesday night.

Jaylen Brown added 25 points and Derrick White finished with 24 to help Boston win its season series with Indiana, 3-2.

Aaron Nesmith led the Pacers with 26 points and 12 rebounds. Pascal Siakam finished with 23 points and Myles Turner added 17. All-Star Tyrese Haliburton had 13 points on 5-for-16 shooting and 10 rebounds.

The Celtics led by 20 points late in the first half, but Indiana rallied and trailed 127-124 when White blocked a tying 3-point attempt by Nesmith. Tatum then denied an attempt by Turner at the rim with 29.3 seconds left, leading to a shot-clock violation. Tatum came up with another block with 11.2 seconds remaining to preserve Boston's five-point lead.

Celtics coach Joe Mazzulla said wins like this will teach his team not to lean too heavy on its offense.

"It's a tough balance for us because we always talk about how the game's connected. You can't have one without the other," Mazzulla said. "But there's moments when they both have to be elite. We had really good defense down the stretch and made some winning plays."

Jrue Holiday said the Celtics got a reminder that they'll have to find different ways to close out opponents.

"We've got to be able to fight through everything," he said. "Fight through expectations. Fight through being up 20 and somebody having a great third quarter and finishing games. If it was easy the whole time, what's the fun in that?"

Warriors 119, 76ers 107: Stephen Curry had 37 points with eight 3-pointers, Jonathan Kuminga had 26 points and host Golden State beat Philadelphia on a night when guard Klay Thompson sat out with an illness.

Curry, who also had eight rebounds and seven assists, shot 12-for-17 in his third straight 30-point game.

Andrewiggins added 23

points, five rebounds and four assists.

Tobias Harris had 26 points and 10 rebounds and Joel Embiid scored 14 points for the Sixers before limping to the locker room with 4:04 left after Kuminga fell on his left knee.

Knicks 118, Jazz 103: Donte DiVincenzo made a career-high nine 3-pointers and scored 33 points, Jalen Brunson had 29 points and nine assists, and host New York wrapped up one of the best months in franchise history with its eighth straight victory.

The Knicks finished 14-2 in January. That was their most wins in a month since going 14-0 in March 1994 and just one shy of their most ever, when they were 15-3 in December 1968.

With starting Knicks forwards Julius Randle and OG Anunoby sidelined for the second straight night, Precious Achiuwa matched a season high with 18 points. Josh Hart finished with 10 points, 10 rebounds and 10 assists, and Isaiah Hartenstein had 14 points and 12 boards.

Collin Sexton scored 22 points for Utah.

Hawks 138, Lakers 122: Trae Young scored 26 points, knocking down his first six attempts from 3-point range, and host Atlanta handed Los Angeles its second double-digit loss in as many nights.

The Lakers, playing without Anthony Davis after a 135-119 loss at Houston on Monday, slipped back below .500 at 24-25. Austin Reaves scored 28 points and LeBron James added 20 in a lackluster performance before a standing-room-only crowd.

Dejounte Murray, who had 24 points for the Hawks, knocked down mid-range jumpers on three straight possessions midway through the fourth quarter to turn back any thoughts of a Lakers comeback.

Raptors 118, Bulls 107: Gary Trent Jr. scored 24 points, Bruce Brown added 19 points and seven rebounds, and short-handed Toronto rallied past host Chicago to snap a season-high five-game skid.

DeMar DeRozan led the Bulls with 25 points and Ayo Dosunmu had 21. Chicago has lost three of four.

Century-old bobsled track getting rebuilt for 2026

Associated Press

ROME — The local organizing committee for the 2026 Winter Olympics decided Tuesday to move forward with rebuilding a century-old bobsled track in Cortina d'Ampezzo, but will also keep open a "Plan B" in case the new venue is not ready by March 2025.

The committee said following a board meeting that its plans hinge on signing a contract with Parma-based construction company Impresa Pizzarotti & C., which has offered to rebuild the Cortina track for \$89 million.

If the contract for the sliding center is signed "it would con-

firm the original masterplan" for the Olympics, the Milan-Cortina committee said, adding that the new venue "would revive Cortina's long tradition in these sports and help future generations."

The announcement comes amid a standoff with the International Olympic Committee, which wants an existing foreign venue in neighboring Austria or Switzerland used instead to cut costs. But the Italian government does not want to finance a foreign venue.

"It is not acceptable for the bobsled races to take place outside Italy," Deputy Premier Antonio Tajani said on X, the

social media platform formerly known as Twitter. "We will do everything to achieve the goal."

Construction would start with less than two years to go before the Milan-Cortina Games — and less than a year before IOC-mandated test events. No sliding track has been built recently in such a short timeframe, and test events have taken on even greater importance following the death of Georgian luger Nodar Kumaritashvili in a training crash hours before the start of the opening ceremony for the 2010 Vancouver Olympics.

"Considering the negative views of the IOC and the inter-

national federations, which are concerned about the timeframe that the project would require, and considering advice from SIMICO (the company in charge of infrastructure for the games), the board has decided not to interrupt dialogue with other existing and functioning venues," the local organizing committee said, adding that it has asked chairman Andrea Varnier "to continue negotiations for an eventual Plan B that would require added budget."

The Milan-Cortina committee added that it realizes that "under no circumstances" can the new track be certified after March 2025.

4 NHL players charged with sexual assault

Associated Press

NHL players Carter Hart of the Philadelphia Flyers, Michael McLeod and Cal Foote of the New Jersey Devils and Dillon Dube of the Calgary Flames have been charged with sexual assault in connection with an alleged assault by several members of Canada's 2018 world junior team.

Attorneys representing Hart, McLeod, Foote and Dube said Tuesday that each player has been charged with sexual assault by police in London, Ontario. They denied any wrongdoing on behalf of their clients.

Hart's lawyers, Megan Savard and Riaz Sayani, said their client is facing one count of sexual assault, adding, "He is innocent and will provide a full response to this false accusation in the proper forum, a court of law."

Legal teams representing McLeod and Dube said the players would be pleading not guilty.

"(We) will vigorously defend the case," McLeod's attorneys, David Humphrey and Seth Weinstein, said in a statement.

"We ask that the public respect Mr. McLeod's privacy, and his family's privacy. Because the matter is now before the court, we will not comment further at this time."

Dube's lawyers, Louis Strezos and Kayleigh Davidson, said their client "maintains his innocence (and) will defend the allegations in court."

Foote's lawyer, Julianna Greenspan, said her client was "innocent of the charge and will defend himself against this allegation to clear his name."

"What is most critical at this time is the presumption of innocence, and the right to a fair trial that everyone in Canada is entitled to," Greenspan said in a statement emailed to The Associated Press. "As the matter is before the court, I ask that Cal's and his family's privacy be respected."

A Devils spokesperson said the organization is aware of the reports and have been told to refer all inquiries to the league. A Flyers spokesman echoed a similar sentiment, saying the team "will respond appropriately to this very serious

matter when the outcomes of the investigations are made public."

"We have now become aware of the charge of sexual assault that has been laid against Dillon Dube," the Flames said in a statement. "We take this matter very seriously. Because the matter is now pending legal proceedings, we will have no further comment at this time."

The latest developments in the case come two days after former NHL player Alex Formenton surrendered to police to face charges. Attorney Daniel Brown said Formenton is innocent "and asks that people not rush to judgment without hearing all of the evidence."

All five players have taken leave from their current clubs over the past 10 days. Their agents have not spoken publicly since.

London police have scheduled a news conference for Monday to address the situation. A spokesperson for police told the AP by email no updates on the investigation will be provided before the news conference.

London police launched their investigation in 2022 after it was disclosed that Hockey Canada had settled a lawsuit with a woman who said she was sexually assaulted by eight members of that gold medal-winning team after a Hockey Canada Foundation fundraising gala.

According to court documents, the woman, then 20, alleged that a man, identified only as "John Doe #1," took her from a bar to a hotel room and invited seven other people into the room to perform undisclosed sexual acts, intimidating her and preventing her from leaving. The woman said in the lawsuit the men directed her to take a shower and asked her to say on video that she was sober.

The woman sought \$3.55 million in damages and dropped the lawsuit after reaching a settlement with Hockey Canada.

The NHL opened its own investigation in 2022 and has pledged to make those findings public. Deputy Commissioner Bill Daly said last week that the league would issue a statement if and when it is appropriate.

Merzlikins makes 21 saves as Blue Jackets blank Blues

Associated Press

ST. LOUIS — Dmitri Voronkov's third-period goal broke a scoreless tie, and the Columbus Blue Jackets snapped the St. Louis Blues' season-high five-game winning streak with a 1-0 victory on Tuesday night.

Voronkov buried a one-timer off a Zach Werenski feed on an odd-man rush at 4:11 of the third. Voronkov has three points in two career games against St. Louis.

The assist moved Werenski past Nick Foligno for third-most in franchise history with 193.

"I just kind of twisted and saw him there, so I fired one over and he makes a good play," Werenski said of the goal. "But I wasn't sure what I was going to do. It kind of worked out, I guess."

Elvis Merzlikins made 21 saves to record his 10th career shutout and first since

blanking Carolina on Jan. 13, 2022, ending a 94-game span between shutouts. His toughest save came early in the third period when he robbed Jake Neighbours with a sprawling pad save.

Columbus played its fifth game in eight days and capped a five-game road trip with a 2-2-1 mark.

"It was amazing," Merzlikins said. "I'm really happy and this is perfect way how to end this for before this break. ... Not gonna lie, we are all really tired. Even this morning at breakfast when I walked down, it was silent. We are done. We want to go home now. And it's really nice."

It was Columbus' first shutout of the season and first since Merzlikins blanked Carolina in 2022.

Jordan Binnington made 21 saves for the Blues, who lost both games against Columbus this season. It was the second time the

Blue Jackets swept a season series from St. Louis and the first time since the 2014-2015 season.

"The first period, we weren't skating, we weren't engaged at all," Blues interim coach Drew Bannister said. "The second period I thought we started to skate a little bit more, but we were playing cute hockey and cute hockey doesn't win at this level."

Sharks 2, Kraken 0: Marc-Edouard Vlasic broke a scoreless tie with 12:33 remaining and Mackenzie Blackwood made 32 saves as host San Jose beat Seattle.

Jan Rutta added an empty-net goal for the Sharks, who have won four of five to move two points ahead of Chicago at the bottom of the NHL standings.

Blackwood earned his first shutout since December 2021 with New Jersey. It was San Jose's first shutout of the season.

Joey Daccord stopped 20 shots in defeat.